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Investigators To Test Wells Around Coronet

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PLANT CITY - As residents next to Coronet Industries continue to voice concerns over cancer and other illnesses, environmental regulators and health officials agreed Tuesday to begin testing wells in those neighborhoods.

State and county environmental agencies and county health officials will share information as the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency and sheriff's office conduct criminal investigations at Coronet phosphate processing plant.

Former workers have accused Coronet managers of ordering them to dump toxic waste and deceive regulatory agencies.

Residents in two neighborhoods near the plant have complained of a high rate of cancer and other illnesses in their communities.

William Lee, 42, who lives on Jim Johnson Road, less than a quarter-mile south of Coronet, said he looks forward to finding out what's in his water. "My wife has had nausea, vomiting, diarrhea and all kinds of stomach problems," he said.

Lee's family and neighbors drink from private wells. He said many have fallen sick while relatively young. His mother, daughter and niece had skin rashes, and his father had two types of cancer.

Lee said acid from the plant has eaten the paint off his vehicles, a common complaint among residents in the area and a side effect of hydrofluoric acid in the air.

County health officials will attempt to determine whether there is a link between health problems and pollution from Coronet or from old landfills in the area.

The state Department of Environmental Protection and the county's Environmental Protection Commission will coordinate efforts in overseeing the plant, which processes alpha tricalcium for use in animal feed supplements. The Japanese-owned company has been under order from both agencies to control water and air pollution.



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DEP southwest region Director Deborah Getzoff said the three agencies will communicate with one another on the investigation, residents' concerns and sampling of wells in the area.

"Each of the agencies has been very busy with various issues on the site. The health concerns are what led to the meeting," EPC Director Richard Garrity said.

Health officials will survey the area to determine the number of private wells in the plant's vicinity. Those within a quarter-mile of the plant will be sampled first, but the testing may expand.

Cancer clusters typically are difficult to prove, but health officials contend they will work hard to serve the public's needs. The agency will have its first town meeting at 7 p.m. Aug. 19 at Marshall Middle School on Maryland Avenue in Plant City.

Although early testing will be limited, health officials said well testing near Coronet "may amount to unanswered questions." But the community's concerns won't be ignored, said county health department Director Douglas Holt. "We'll just have to play out the scenario," he said.

Toxic levels of arsenic, cadmium, chromium, lead and gross alpha radium have been found in groundwater and soil on the plant's property, and old landfills in the area could be sources of pollution.

Ray Suarez hopes health officials test wells near Sparkman Road. He wonders whether contaminants there are associated with the illness of his stepdaughter, Amber, 19.

She was diagnosed with non-Hodgkins lymphoma, a rare cancer, especially in young American women, he said.

She is in remission.

Suarez seems convinced the state never will prove links between cancer and pollution in the area, but he can't help wonder whether something in that well might have made her sick.

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